

Yams, Silence and Resilience: Indigenous Climate Wisdom from Cakova

In the Pacific Island of Moala, Fiji, the village of Cakova is reviving an ancient tradition to celebrate the harvest and community wellbeing.

Known as the *I Sevu* or First Harvest ceremony, this ritual marks the sacred offering of the yam, the revered “king crop,” to ancestral deities. Today, in the midst of escalating climate challenges, Cakova’s revival of this ceremony stands as a powerful testament to Indigenous resilience and the enduring value of traditional practices in climate adaptation.

The Roots and Rituals of I Sevu, First Harvest Ceremony

For generations, the *I Sevu* was more than just a harvest celebration—it was a powerful act of community unity. Each December, spiritual leaders called for a month-long silence, halting everyday conflicts and distractions to honor the presence of harvest deities in the yam fields.¹ During this sacred period, families engaged in traditional reconciliation practices, cultivating and sharing yams as symbols of peace and harmony.²

Fijians celebrate *I Sevu* through offerings to different deities and unique rituals, including stories, song and dances. The first yam harvested, usually handpicked from a specially consecrated plot, was traditionally offered to an ancestral priest. Today, in Cakova, the yam is presented to the church priest as well as to the Chiefs and traditional landowners.

Yams as Tools for Climate Resilience

In Moala, climate change has intensified soil erosion from heavy rains and saltwater intrusion from rising tides, threatening crops like taro and yam. The Pacific Adaptation to Climate Change (PACC) program, active in Fiji from 2009 to 2014, warned that such shifts could halve traditional crop yields without adaptive measures.³ For Cakova, the return of *I Sevu*’s is both a cultural reclamation and a practical response to these pressures, ensuring the yam—a hardy, cyclone-resistant crop—remains a cornerstone of food security.

The yam’s ability to thrive during cyclone season (November to April) makes it a vital crop for climate adaptation. Government-supported programs now promote yam cultivation as a model for sustainable agriculture, recognizing its economic and ecological value as well as the strength of Indigenous practices. Fiji’s Ministry of Agriculture and Waterways has identified yams as key root crops for climate resilience and food security, highlighting varieties that can grow under extreme climatic conditions, resist diseases and have a long shelf life.⁴

Lessons from the village of Cakova

Cakova’s First Harvest offers a window into how ancient traditions can guide global climate resilience. Rooted in centuries-old practices, it stands as an inspiring model of how cultural wisdom can shape

¹ Based on interview of Fijian Indigenous scholar, Simone Sevudredre. See <https://legendfm.com.fj/renowned-indigenous-fijian-scholar-simione-sevudredre-explains-the-tradition-behind-how-we-celebrate-new-year/>

² Ibid.

³ See https://www.sprep.org/attachments/Climate_Change/PACC_Report_of_in-country_consultations_Fiji.pdf

⁴ See <https://pafpnet.spc.int/attachments/article/749/Resilientcrops2006.pdf>

innovative responses to modern problems. The *I Sevu* reminds us that sustainable adaptation is not just about new inventions, but about the wisdom and spirituality embedded in our cultural heritage.

Cakova's journey offers a vivid, comparative case study: while conventional approaches often fragment environmental, social, and economic strategies, Indigenous practices like *I Sevu* demonstrate how these dimensions are intrinsically linked. They show that when communities come together to honor the rhythms of nature, they not only preserve their cultural identity but also forge resilient solutions that inspire hope in the fight against climate change. As we navigate an increasingly uncertain climate future, the wisdom embedded in traditions like *I Sevu* offers enduring inspiration and practical guidance for communities worldwide.

With a heartfelt *Vinaka vakalevu* (thank you) and *Sa Malo* (prosperity), Cakova offers the world a vision of climate adaptation where tradition and spirituality are not barriers to progress, but roots of survival. In the face of rising waters and fiercer winds, the *I Sevu* stands tall—like the yam itself—enduring, adapting, and feeding hope.



Yam harvest in Cakova. Photos shared by Usaia Moli

This case story is part of a series on the LCIPP webportal showcasing the climate leadership and nature stewardship of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, rooted in traditional knowledge, values and worldviews, and local knowledge systems.

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